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# Parental Cultural Socialization And Perception Of Discrimination As Antecedents For Transracial Adoptees' Ethnic Identity

Rosa Rosnati <sup>a\*</sup>, Laura Ferrari <sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Catholic University of Milan, Family Studies and Research University Centre, Largo Gemelli, 1, Milan, 20123, Italy<sup>b</sup> Catholic University of Milan, Family Studies and Research University Centre, Largo Gemelli, 1, Milan, 20123, Italy

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## Abstract

Ethnic identity has been explored mainly among minorities and only recently among transracial adoptees. This process is particularly complex because adoptees do not share their heritage with their adoptive families. Research has demonstrated that ethnic identity is positively correlated with adoptees' self-esteem and psychological well being and that it is enhanced by parents' cultural socialization, but these studies were mainly carried out in the U.S. cultural context. Moreover identity construction is embedded within the social network and empirical results showed that high levels of discrimination increase the social group identification among minority's members as a means of protecting their individual well-being. However, there is a lack of research exploring this issue in transracial adoptees. To partially fill this gap, the current study was carried out: it focuses on the factors promoting or hindering transracial adoptees' ethnic identity, in particular parents' cultural socialization and the perception of social discrimination. 128 transracially adoptees living in Italy (15 to 25 years of age) and one of their parents filled out a questionnaire. Analysis, using the Structural Equation Model, showed that parents play a vital role helping the adoptees in the construction of their ethnic identity through their cultural socialization strategies, whereas the perception of social discrimination undermines the ethnic identity construction. The results will be discussed in light of their potential practical implications.

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**Keywords:** Cultural socialization, discrimination, adoption, ethnic identity;

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## 1. Introduction

Adolescence and transition to adulthood are particularly critical periods for transracial adoptees, who have to face specific challenges and developmental tasks, the most crucial of which is the negotiation of the ethnic identity into a

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\* Corresponding Rosa Rosnati. Tel.: +39 027234 2347  
E-mail address: [rosa.rosnati@unicatt.it](mailto:rosa.rosnati@unicatt.it)

coherent sense of self (1; 2; 3). Despite the fact that most research focused on ethnic dimensions has involved ethnic minorities, due to the increasing number of international adoptions in all western countries, more recently, this topic has been studied in relation to the adopted child's experience (4). Transracial adoptees, in fact, find themselves within a cultural and ethnic context outside of their birth context, in which they had sometimes lived for years. However, unlike immigrants, these adoptees cannot build their own ethnic identity through recognition of their parents' somatic traits and culture as being similar to their own. As highlighted by Scherman, transracial adoptees become part of a new culture through a peculiar migratory process that takes place in solitude rather than within a group. Adoptees thus find themselves facing the difficult task of how to integrate the cultural baggage of their country of origin with their belonging to a new family and identifying with that family's national culture. Thus, they may be eager to re-appropriate their birth culture as a second culture: as such, as they grow, many adoptees seek information about their birth culture.

Empirical evidence indicated that the development of the adoptee's ethnic identity is essential for a mature and integrated personality and is associated with a stronger feeling of well-being, a lower level of distress and a higher degree of self-esteem.

As a matter of fact, as the construction of ethnic identity takes place within the relational network, adoptive parents play a crucial role in the development of an adoptee's ethnic identity, through the cultural socialization practices they actively implement, in their efforts to introduce the adoptee's birth culture into their families. As these studies were mostly carried out in the U.S. and refer to transracial adoptions of Asian-born children, there is currently a paucity of studies focused on the association between parental cultural socialization and ethnic identity acquisition in different cultures and social contexts. Although previous studies found significant difference between fathers' and mothers' reports, the specific contribution played by adoptive mother and father for cultural socialization has remained largely unexplored. Therefore, perceptions of both parents were included in the present study in order to analyze the effect of cultural socialization on the course of ethnic identity development among international adoptees in Italy.

Moreover, as ethnic identity is not a static dimension, but a gradual process deriving from negotiating the feedback of the cultural context, some research has indicated that transracial adoptees experience more widespread discrimination from their surroundings than do same-race adoptees: they are subjected to negative comments in their everyday life stemming from either their adoption or their racial minority status. Therefore, the perception of discrimination adversely affects individual well-being in members of disadvantaged groups as well as for person who was adopted.

According to the Rejection-Identification Model, ethnic identity turned out to play a key role as a mediation variable between perceived discrimination and self-esteem. In this direction, in order to deal with the negative consequences of discrimination on well-being, people could increase the degree of identification with their minority in-group. Indeed, minority group identification could be associated with more positive self-esteem and psychological adjustment. This model has been applied in a broad corpus of research involving a variety of minority groups, but is under-investigated in the adoptive population. Despite a large number of studies confirming the predicted correlation, other research suggests that ethnic identification does not always increase in response to perceived discrimination and that a higher degree of discrimination could be associated with a lower degree of ethnic identity. These heterogeneous findings indicate that these relations are quite complex and perceived discrimination and in-group identification in specific ethnic groups should be explored further.

With reference to the theoretical background and empirical findings, the aim of the present study was to analyze first, the influence of ethnic identity on adoptees self-esteem, and second, the adoptee's perception of discrimination and parental cultural socialization as significant predictors of transracial adoptees' ethnic identity. In particular, we hypothesized that: ethnic identity would play a mediational role between parental cultural socialization and the child's self-esteem, and would mediate the impact of adoptees' perception of discrimination on their self-esteem.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants**

Participants totalled 384 Italian subjects: 128 transracial adoptees, and mothers and fathers of the adoptees; 53.1

% of the adoptees were girls and 46.1 % boys, all aged between 15 and 25 years ( $M = 18.57$ ;  $SD = 3.29$ ). Subject age at placement was 55.44 months on average ( $SD = 45.02$ ); all were born in Latin American countries (Brazil 45,3%, Chile 22,7%, Colombia 15,6%, Bolivia 8,6%, Peru 3,1%, Mexico 0,8%) and self-reported their ethnicity as Latin American. Mean age of mothers was 53.26 ( $SD = 5.71$ ) and 55.18 ( $SD = 6.22$ ) for fathers; most parent participants (95.7 %) were married. Adoptive families were randomly recruited through agencies and professionals working in the field of international adoption. Parents and adolescents were informed by letter about the main objectives of the study and were asked to complete a questionnaire. Consenting adoptive families were sent a questionnaire or were asked to complete the online version. All were instructed to return the completed questionnaires to the investigators by mail.

## 2.2. Measures

Information was gleaned from the self-report questionnaire, in which children and both parents answered questions about socio-demographic characteristics and scales for measuring identity and subjective well-being. The measures, which were originally developed in English, were translated into Italian and then back translated into English.

### *Child questionnaire*

**Ethnic Identity.** Multi group Ethnic Identity Measure, MEIM (20) (e.g., I have a strong sense of belonging with my ethnic group”) was applied to measure ethnic identity. For this study, we selected the 5-item version measuring the affirmation as a component of ethnic identity and applied the adaptation carried out by Lee and Yoo (21) to the adopted population. Participants indicated their responses on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was .86.

**Perception of Discrimination.** Participants responded to a 5-item measure of Perceived discrimination Scale (22) (e.g., I have been excluded or rejected by others because of my ethnicity/race) measuring the experience of transracial adoption discrimination regarding both adoptive origins and ethnic dimension. The possible responses ranged from 1 (never) to 4 (very often). Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was .67.

**Self-esteem.** Self-esteem was measured by the Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale Revised (23) including two dimensions: Self-Liking, referring to the evaluative experience of oneself as a good or a bad person and a self-ascribed social value, and Self-Competence, positive or negative evaluation of the self as a causal agent and a source of power and efficacy. The scale measures Self-Liking (SL) and Self-Competence (SC) by two 8-item subscales, each balanced as to positive and negative items. Respondents state their degree of agreement with global statements indicating low or high SC (e.g., “I tend to be unsuccessful; I am a capable person) and low or high SL (e.g., I tend to devalue myself; I like myself). Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The global index of self-esteem was based on the scores of the two subscales. Cronbach’s alpha was .86 for the SL subscale, .74 for the SC subscale and .88 for the total scale scores.

### *Parent questionnaire*

**Cultural Socialization.** The Cultural Socialization Scale (9) was applied to assess the frequency of parental cultural socialization strategies among transracial adoptees. In this study a subscale of enculturation composed of 5-items (e.g., “I have encouraged my child to read books about his/her ethnic group) with a 5-point scale (1 = never; 5 = very often) was employed. Cronbach’s alpha was .77 for fathers and .72 for mothers.

## 3. Results

The variable distributions for variety and multivariate normality were verified, showing that skew ranged from -.62 to .57 and kurtosis ranged from -.83 to .31. Normalized estimates of Mardia’s coefficient were considered to be acceptable ( $< 3$ ).

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations, reported in Table 1, were computed for all variables in the model. Adoptees reported a medium-high level of ethnic identity, an overall moderate level of self-esteem and a medium-low level of discrimination perceived by others. Parents assessed a medium-high level of cultural socialization. No significant differences were detected between the cultural levels of socialization mothers and fathers [ $\chi^2(3) = 1.669$ ,

$p = .858]$ .

Table 1 Mean, Standard Deviation (SD) and Pearson's Correlation (\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ) among variables in the model.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Ethnic Identity	1				
2. Perception of Discrimination	-.236*	1			
3. Cultural Socialization (mother)	.232**	.123	1		
4. Cultural Socialization (father)	.277**	.223*	.427**	1	
5. Self-Esteem	.225*	-.361**	-.020	-.095	1
M	3.06	1.90	2.90	2.88	2.77
SD	.66	.63	.80	.82	.65

In order to test our hypotheses, the covariance matrix was calculated and the structural equation modeling techniques were carried out using the SPSS AMOS 16 statistical package. Parameters were estimated using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) in the AMOS program to account for missing data in covariance matrices and in all analyses. The models were examined according to multiple fit indexes:  $\chi^2$  values (low values indicate better fits), degrees of freedom, number of cases and corresponding  $p$  values, comparative fit index (CFI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) to account for the model parsimony.

First, a direct non-mediated model in which all variables, including ethnic identity, were directly related to self-esteem was tested. The model estimation of variance in behavioural problems was 15 %, but the fit indexes were inadequate [ $\chi^2 (5) = 25.015$ ,  $p = .000$ , CFI = .687, RMSEA = .18]. Next, a model in which parental cultural socialization and perception of discrimination predict ethnic identity, which in turn is the predictor of self-esteem, was tested. In addition, perception of discrimination was hypothesized to be negatively associated to self-esteem. This model showed relatively good fit indexes [ $\chi^2 (4) = 7.458$ ,  $p = .114$ , CFI = .946, RMSEA = .08] accounting for 17 % of variance in self-esteem. The inspection of modification indexes does not suggest additional adjustments. Figure 1 shows the significant parameters of the model.

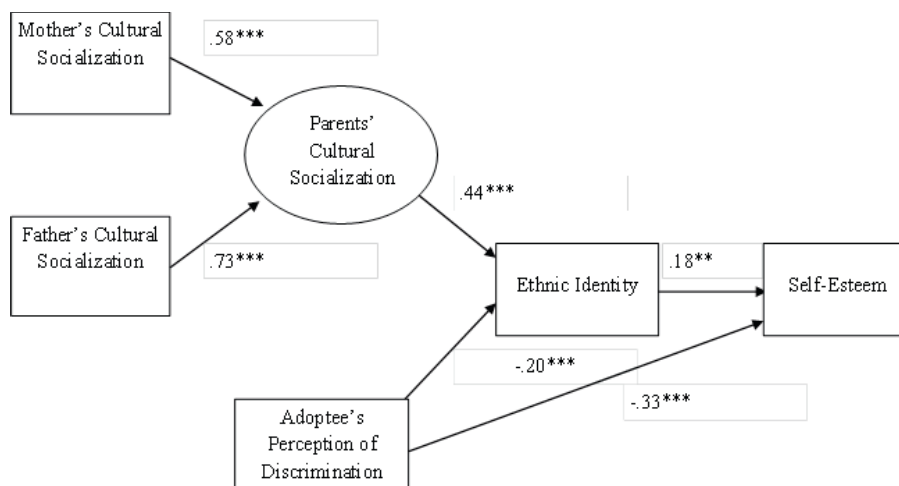


Figure 1. Structural Equation Model. Only significant paths are shown. Numbers are standardized regression weights (\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

The present study focuses on the construction ethnic identity among transracial adoptees within the family and social context. In particular, results highlighted the mediational role played by ethnic identity between the family and the surrounding social context, on the one hand, and the adoptees' self-esteem, on the other.

Results point to the impact of family variables on the way adoptees define their identity: consistent with previous studies carried out in the U.S. on adopted adolescents and young adults, parents' cultural socialization strategies enhance adoptees' ethnic identity, which, in turn, positively influences their self-esteem. It is worthwhile noting that both adoptive parents, and fathers above all, play an important role in encouraging the child's connection to his/her birth country background and in developing a positive ethnic identification. Specifically, data pointed to the key role of the father as a significant resource for the development of the adoptee's ethnic identity during adolescence and the transition to adulthood, thus confirming previous findings.

Moreover, consistent with a number of empirical investigations focused on ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups as well as on adoptive families, findings of the present study revealed that the adoptees' perception of discrimination is negatively related to his or her levels of self-esteem. However, contrary to what was hypothesized according to the Rejection-Identification Model (16), among transracial Italian adoptees groups the perceptions of discrimination reduce the level of in-group ethnic identification. We could attempt to explain the inconsistency of these results referring to the fact that the minority groups might react to discrimination differently according to the social minority's group status: Latinos in Italy are more likely to be considered of low social status. Consequently, the more adoptees perceive that they are discriminated against; the more they are prone to hiding their ethnic identification, rather than increasing their identification with their ethnic group.

These findings could have crucial implications for adoption agencies and professionals who support adoptive parents, in both pre- and post-adoption support. The adoptive parent training would encourage parents to learn about cultural socialization strategies and to develop skills, motivation, and resources to help their children to face perceived discrimination.

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